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SUBJECT: COLOGNE MOSQUE/CULTURAL CENTER CORNERSTONE LAYING - A MILESTONE FOR INTEGRATION

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**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: On November 7, the cornerstone for the Turkish Islamic Union's (DITIB) Cologne mosque and cultural center was laid in the presence of 2,000 guests, including senior representatives from the German and Turkish governments, and representatives of major religious communities. After three years in planning, German and Turkish representatives hailed the event as a victory for Cologne's citizens, especially its large Muslim population, mostly of Turkish origin. The cornerstone laying ceremony celebrated the persistent determination of Cologne's city hall -- under the formidable leadership of former Cologne Lord Mayor Fritz Schramma -- and North-Rhine Westphalia's (NRW) government to work together with DITIB -- directly tied to Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) -- closely to counter right wing extremist opposition to the project and promote further Muslim integration in German society. End summary.

**¶2.** (U) On the German side, MFA Minister of State Werner Hoyer, who has his constituency in Cologne, represented the federal government. Chancellor Merkel -- although not present at the ceremony -- embraced the mosque's planned construction as evidence that integration was an important value in Germany. In a written statement read aloud by the organizers, Merkel said that the construction of Germany's largest mosque was evidence that people had found a home in Germany and were here to stay. Thomas Kufen, NRW Commissioner for Integration, said the road to the event had often been rocky, but all involved had jointly shouldered the responsibility and seen it through to the end. Cologne was an open, tolerant city, and the cultural center would be a place for dialogue and togetherness.

**¶3.** (U) Former Cologne Lord Mayor Fritz Schramma, a supporter of the Turkish-Muslim community throughout the process, spoke of the wish, from the outset, to create a mosque and cultural center that was transparent, open and welcoming. It would be, he declared, a house for the future of Cologne and a place for integration. He echoed the words of renowned Cologne architect Paul Boehm, the mosque/cultural center's designer, who described the mosque and cultural center as a place for people who are at home in two worlds and two cultures. Representatives of the Evangelical and Protestant churches also stressed the right of every religion to have a place of worship and referred to the "Cologne Compact for Freedom," in which all religious groups in Cologne have pledged to work together against hate and prejudice.

**¶4.** (U) On behalf of the Turkish government, GOT Diyanet President Ali Bardakoglu described the mosque and cultural center not only as a success for Cologne's Muslim population,

but for all of Cologne's citizens and all Germans. Bardakoglou further noted that the mosque would help lay the foundation for mutual respect and set an example of religious freedom for the world. He indicated that the GOT would make good on its pledge to return St. Paul's Church in Tarsus, Turkey to use as a church and a center for Christian study. The only discordant note came from Turkish Minister of State Faruk Celik, who delivered a speech more befitting a campaign rally. On the other hand, DITIB President Sadi Arslan thanked all layers of the German government and the public, describing the result as a clear "yes" to co-existence and diversity, and a clear "no" to segregation. The mosque, he pledged, would be a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow.

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